



Sharing

One of the most enjoyable things about owning a hot air balloon is the pleasure of sharing the sport with other people. Ballooning is a team effort and the chase crew members are a very important part of the team. Even though I am sure someone could figure out how to inflate and launch a hot air balloon by himself, someone still has to follow along on the ground and be there when the balloon lands. The members of the crew know they are an essential part of a team and this promotes a very close feeling of comradeship among the group.

The same feelings are shared with new people who are having their first experience with ballooning or who may just be coming along for a one time ride. I always ask even the commercial customers if they would like to do something to help in the launching of the balloon or the deflating of the balloon and packing it away. Most people accept with a large grin on their faces and, I'm sure, return home having had more fun for doing so.

The vast majority of balloon pilots I know get a real kick out of giving people rides. This particularly applies to having the chance of giving a person their first ride. This pleasure is shared by the crew members because they can all remember and relive their first ride in the process. Stories about first-timers provide a lot of conversations for windy days when we can't fly and for comfortable times with the crew over a cold drink or hot cup of coffee. I remember two times in particular.

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balloon ride. We had known her and her husband for a couple of years and they had talked to us several times about ballooning. We could see they were interested and finally invited them to go out with us one Sunday. They arrived at the launch site on time and helped with the inflation and then stood around the gondola with everyone else. I looked around to see who would be good to take for a ride. It is usually my custom to take the ladies for a ride first. This is not entirely based on courtesy or my enjoyment of the company of the opposite sex. Women are usually lighter than men, and it is a good practice to make the first load as light as possible until you can burn off some of the weight of the fuel. It is also my custom to never announce ahead of time who will get to go on the first ride. The anticipation helps build up the excitement.

Helen stood by the gondola with the usual smile of excitement on her face as I adjusted the instruments and set the valves. I looked around at the faces of the crew and decided it had been some time since Laurlie had flown. "Come on, honey, it's your turn," and she quickly climbed into the gondola. I had room for one more.

"Helen, would you like to go?" I asked.

"I . . . I don't know," she replied and glanced toward her husband. "I want to, but I'm afraid of heights." She didn't appear afraid, but this is something I never questioned. I looked at her husband and he just shrugged his shoulders.

"It's up to you," I said searching her face. "If you want to try, I'll keep it close to the ground and if you get scared, we can probably land and let you out."

"All right, but don't you dare get too high until I say OK," she said in a surprisingly small voice.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll stay high enough to clear the trees, OK?"

She smiled weakly and climbed into the basket. I gave her the usual instructions about obeying the pilot, facing the front of the gondola, bending her knees when landing, how and what to hang onto, and other general balloon safety procedures. Helen listened intently and then maneuvered around until her shoulders were braced between two of the uprights, grasping one upright with each hand.

"Are you goin' to be all right?" I asked. A little of the color had drained from her face, but she look back and smiled.

"You're darn right. I've gone this far and I'm not going to back out now."

The last thing I want in a balloon is someone who panics on take off so, as I heated the air in the envelope, I watched her closely. Her color wasn't too good, but her knees seemed to be steady. Otherwise, she didn't look like the type who would try to jump out when the balloon left the ground. In fact, her hands were gripping the uprights so tightly that I was glad she wasn't holding onto me. Sundancer took off gently and, even though she didn't appear to be overjoyed, she did look around and even looked down at the ground. This was a good sign. Most people quickly lose their fear once the balloon leaves the ground. Laurlie tried to ease any further tensions by talking to her.

"Did you notice how the ground seems to move away from you instead of it seeming like you move away from the ground?"

"I noticed, I noticed," Helen gulped. "How . . . how high are we?"

"About twenty-five feet," I said. "Do you want to try a little higher?"

Helen hesitated and then nodded. I fed some heat into the balloon and as we rose higher into the air, Helen's knees bent and she sank down in the gondola. I let the balloon cool off and we descended and Helen straightened up. That was interesting. I flew along at the lower altitude for awhile and then ascended about fifty feet. There went Helen's knees again! It wasn't real dramatic, but as the balloon rose and fell in altitude, Helen rose and sank in the opposite direction. It was like watching an elevator going up and down the side of a building. Her eyes were even coordinated with the action; the higher the balloon went, the bigger her eyes got. Both Laurlie and I were grinning at each other, but I am not a sadist so I asked her if she would like to land and get out.

"I thiiiiink so," she replied and I agreed. We were about 100 yards from the nearest road so I brought the balloon down to just above the tops of the low bushes. I figured we could cruise along this way for awhile and give her a little bit of a ride without causing her any discomfort.

Suddenly Helen screamed, "What's that?" and pointed ahead, and then grabbed me around the neck. A four foot rattlesnake was weaving across the ground about ten yards ahead of us.

"Take it up, take it up," she yelled in my ear. By this time we were passing right over the snake and I could feel her standing on the tips of her toes and I wasn't too sure but what she going to try to climb up on my shoulders. I put heat into the balloon and we rose to about twenty feet.

"Are you sure this high enough?" she asked and looked over the side at the receding view of the snake. She still had hold of my neck.

"Yes, I'm sure he would never be able to strike this high," I said.

"Don't go down; there might be another one."

"I thought you wanted to land and get out."

"I . . . I think I'll wait for awhile." She loosened her grip on me just slightly and looked around. "It's OK if we go a little higher. I wouldn't want to hit a tree or nothin' where I might fall out."

By this time it was pretty clear that if we did hit a tree or something she was going to use me as an anchor, so I took the balloon up about fifty feet. She finally let go of me and now her main concern was that we not get too close to the ground. It took Laurlie and me fifteen minutes to convince her that it was all right to bring the balloon back down and land.

The second incident that sticks in my memory involved a goodwill flight. This means donating your balloon and your time for a worthy cause of some kind or another. It's normally reserved for very special occasions. The phone call for this occasion had come a couple of nights before.

"Cal, this is John. I've been contacted by the Chamber of Commerce. There is a group of foreign gymnastic students in for a meet and they would like us to take some of them for a balloon ride. It would be a freebee, but it would be good publicity for ballooning."

"Sure, why not," I said. I had a mental picture of taking some cute, foreign, college-age type for the ride of her lifetime.

The day of the flight we arrived at the field early. John had set up about twenty balloons for the adventure. Each of us

were scheduled to take a couple of riders and supposedly at least one of the pair would understand enough English so I could give them safety instructions. As I drove up to the launch site, I looked around for the expected slim figures you associate with gymnasts. Instead, the field was covered with kids. The short, skinny kind, ranging from about eight to twelve years old. It was a junior gymnastic meet. John hadn't mentioned that. Of course, I hadn't asked. Sneaky fellow, that John.

I checked in and was assigned two girls. It turned out that one of the pair was scared to go without taking along a younger brother. What the heck. They were all small enough that the three of them combined wouldn't have weighed as much as one adult, so I agreed to take all three. I inflated the balloon, had them get into the basket, and tried to give them instructions. I soon found out the girl who was trying to interpret could barely understand English.

"I want them to hang on and face the way the balloon is going when we land. OK?" I demonstrated with my hands.

"What's 'land'?" she asked.

"You know, when the balloon touches the ground," I answered and patted my hands together like one hand was the balloon and the other hand was the ground.

"OK, I see," and she turned to the others and rattled off several sentences in Spanish.

"When we land, you bend your knees." The two other children giggled as I bent my knees and pantomimed the bouncing of the balloon across the ground.

After much more pantomiming and gestures and questions and acting like a darn fool, I was fairly certain they understood what I wanted and we took off. It was the kind of a day where I had to take the balloon up about 2,000 feet above the ground before I could find an air current that would take us in the direction I wanted to fly. The kids acted as if we were no more than a few feet above the ground. They even hung over the side of the gondola until I pulled them back and made them understand, with finger shaking and some explanations that they should be more careful. They chattered among themselves and occasionally the girl who understood English would ask a question. The looks of excitement and pleasure on their shining faces made it all worthwhile.

When I was ready to catch the ground level current back toward the launch site, I let the balloon descend to about fifty feet above the ground. We had just established a nice level flight pattern when Sundancer hit a down draft. The balloon bounced off the ground hard and then the wind shifted and picked up speed. The kids yelled and laughed and chattered in Spanish. I was too busy to explain anything and could only check to be certain they were hanging on. It was obvious the weather was quickly turning sour.

Once the balloon had stabilized from the bounce I looked around for a landing place. The kids laughed with delight as we picked up speed. I didn't; it looked like it could be a rough landing. I spotted a fairly good area about half a mile ahead and leveled the balloon off with the bottom of the gondola about three feet above the ground. It was obvious the children really thought this was fun. I told them to hang on tight and tried to brace myself in front of them. When we landed, the gondola bounced several times and we finally slid to a stop. I fed some heat into the envelope and then checked the children. They looked up at me wide-eyed, but unhurt. They had hung on like good sports and stayed put like they had been told. I was proud of them.

The wind was still kicking up and the gondola slid a couple of feet with every puff so, once I saw the chase crew coming down the road, I pulled the deflation line. As the envelope sagged the young boy looked at me from the bottom of the gondola and then spoke to the girl.

She turned to me. "He says this was the best part of the whole ride and asks if we can do it again!"

Over the years I have taken several hundred people on hot air balloon rides. Many foreign visitors had only seen a balloon once or twice before and many of them visited Albuquerque specifically to ride in a balloon. For many people, a balloon ride is the realization of a long-time dream. In all cases it is a special thing for me to be able to share with them. For some of them, it will be a singular experience to be remembered and talked about for the rest of their lives. For some the lure of floating in the clear blue sky will become so strong that they will join us in flying these great flying machines.